

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Yasmine Gooneratne, *The Sweet and Simple Kind* (Little, Brown, 2009)

Beneath the apparently unsophisticated title *The Sweet and Simple Kind*,<sup>1</sup> Yasmine Gooneratne's novel embraces a large and complex canvas to offer an in-depth analysis of Sri Lankan society during the period 1935 to 1964. Through a detailed chronicling of the Anglican Christian, wealthy, Westernised Wijesinha family saga the novel successfully unravels the social and political hypocrisies prevalent in that society. Shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize 2007 and the International Impac Dublin Award 2008, the novel arrests the reader's attention through the engaging story of Tsunami and Latha Wijesinha, two smart young women who develop into mature, educated and independent adults. The account of their continuing friendship in quest of personal freedom and emancipation in the newly-independent Sri Lanka of the 1950s and 60s is subtly interwoven with Gooneratne's humorous sarcasm and irony which attack, on the one hand, prevalent social discrimination on the basis of race, class, caste and religion, and on the other, the inordinate craving for money and power.

The novel opens with Gooneratne's exposure of a society that considered 'silence, sweetness, and simplicity were the virtues that were most highly valued in women and girls' (64). Latha's mother, Soma Wijesinha's, desperation to get her daughter married reminds the readers of Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, as she heaps scorn upon her daughter, who, despite her mother's towering efforts, ruins her chance to impress Anupam Munasinha by articulating her desire to study in the University – 'Fancy letting a catch like Anupam Munasinha slip through your fingers!' (176). Although Latha's true Sinhala name indicates that she would be growing up to be a perfect wife and would 'cling to her husband as a creeper clings to a tree' (9), Latha from an early age shows that she has a mind of her own. Her more rebellious cousin, the appropriately named Tsunami, even at the tender age of eight, can cut her aunt's proud explanation of Latha's name short by saying 'I understand, Auntie. A kind of parasite' (9). Thus from the beginning of this 630-page novel, Gooneratne prepares the reader for a turbulent, transitional period in Sri Lankan history when the young generation started dreaming of a 'New World Order' (145).

But the actual situation was far from this. Gooneratne questions the efficacy of the Citizenship Act of 1948 and the imposition of Sinhala as the only official language in a land also peopled by Tamils, Muslims and Burghers that led to the violent race riots of 1958. Patriotism takes an ugly turn as Gooneratne reveals through her oblique references to the self-appointed heroes who believed that 'they had a duty to defend their motherland from marauding Tamils, [...] started looting Tamil homes, raping Tamil women, and beating up Tamil labourers and public officers' (551). Latha's teacher Paula Phillips and her husband Rajan have to be rescued by her cousin Chris, eliciting Rajan's ironic comment that they are 'refugees in [...] [their] own country' (559). The sorry state of a caste and race-ridden society also creates the amusing Mrs. Lobelia Raptor, the Warden of James Peries Hall at Peradeniya

<sup>1</sup> The Sweet and Simple Kind was first published in 2006 by Perera Hussein Publishing House, Sri Lanka.

University, who lets loose a stream of invectives against democracy – ‘caste counts’, ‘low caste people smell’ (291) and ‘Tamils, even high-caste Tamils, smell of gingelly oil’ (293).

The way in which race and caste played an important role in the political arena has been introduced quite early by Gooneratne. Moira Wijesinha, who eventually married her cousin Rowland, expresses her concern that Rowland’s chance of being elected would substantially lessen due to the fact of his having an Indian wife because ‘the district was mostly populated by Sinhalese people’ (88). But as he acquires the coveted ministerial post with Moira as his devoted wife, Gooneratne makes the best use of this situation to expose the vacuity and chicanery of these power-mongering politicians. Moira’s social activities consist of her inevitable presence in Colombo’s social scene, where she is regularly photographed, her saris and accessories described in detail and her jewellery assessed to the nearest rupee. Her only ‘contribution’ to society is to vote against the installation of a water service in the village which would have saved the already over-worked village women from walking three times a day to the well for water and insisting instead on building a prayer hall which could double as a venue for public meetings. Mrs Wijesinha’s zeal to paint everything in her husband’s party colour of green does not spare Tsunami’s room in her university residence. But her husband does not mind changing his party colour and even his religion when he fails to retain his cabinet post under the new government, exposing the power-hungry politician’s true character. And Moira Wijesinha dutifully accepts the party’s nomination in order to further her political ambition even as her husband lay dying in the hospital.

How power corrupts basic human values is the substance of Gooneratne’s scathing attack throughout the novel. Rowland Wijesinha uses strong-arm tactic to break Tsunami’s romantic relationship with Dr Daniel Rajaratnam, a Tamil tutor, because a Tamil son-in-law would do much damage to his political career. Ranil and Tara’s inordinate meanness, jealousy and cupidity are evident in not only denying Tsunami the legitimate share of her father’s property but is also manifested in Ranil’s unforgettable wedding present to her youngest sister – a shrewd strategy to burn down Tsunami’s husband, Sujit Roy’s, flourishing boatyard. And last but not the least Moira Wijesinha’s proposal to Latha as Ranil’s future wife is only another instance of her political manipulation because she believes that Latha would be the perfect hostess when Ranil accepted the ambassadorial post in France, not only because of Latha’s sound knowledge of French and sophisticated cuisines, but also because she is a ‘modest, sensible girl, a sweet simple girl’ (628) who knows that ‘a wise wife turns a blind eye to her husband’s little *piccadillies*’ (628). The reader has not yet forgotten Ranil’s fatal offering of ‘Plantation Hospitality’ to the guests in his estate, in accordance with the time-honoured custom of assigning low-caste and humble young women the duty of pleasing the visitors at night, when Chelvathy Vellasamy, a sixteen-year-old girl, stabbed Mr. Palipana, the son of a minister to save her twin sister, Rukmini’s, honour.

With generous amounts of poetry punctuating the lucid prose the novel is not only a satiric and sarcastic critique of the 1950s and 60s Sri Lankan society and politics; it is a novel expressing hope for a better future, as Latha believes that ‘it’s up to our generation to change it’ (307). She convincingly utters that by separating Tsunami and Dr Rajaratnam ‘their families actually diminished our society’ (405). Tsunami’s unclouded discretion sees through her beloved father’s political chicanery — ‘I love my papa very dearly [...] [b]ut when it comes to politics, I don’t believe a

single word he says' (298). And the title assumes its radical ironic implication at the end as the so-called sweet and simple Latha exercises her sharp discernment in choosing to be with her most prudent, sensible and steadfast cousin Christopher. Thus the novel transcends its limited cocoon of love, politics and family turmoil to open up a broad universalism in its upholding of basic human values.

**Sanghamitra Dalal**